THE PROMISE BROKEN

March 13, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
2 Chronicles 36:14-21
Psalm 137:1-6
John 3:14-21

"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"
-Psalm 137:4 (RSV)

> "Being taken prisoner means being stripped down. Suddenly everything you have come to rely on is gone. Your possessions, your job, your plans, those dearest to you, your country - all these are, in a peculiar way, no longer there. There's just you - and God?"

David H. C. Read, distinguished pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, wrote that in his autobiography. Read was a newly ordained Church of Scotland pastor, a bright theologian with a promising future, a chaplain with the British Expeditionary Force in 1939, and in short order, a prisoner of war. He remained in prison in Germany for the next five years. His account is honest and powerful. "There's just you - and God?" he wrote. And it is a question, not a statement. He describes how the experience of dislocation, exile, separation, homesickness, have a profound effect on the depths of the human soul... "The experience of being stripped of all the other things on which one normally relies does throw one back on God in a very challenging way. Is God really there? Does God care about what's happening?"

2,500 years earlier a poet in exile asked: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Read tells about the 250 mile forced march across France and how, when the march came to a town, the British prisoners straightened up and sang as lustily as they could - everything from the 23rd Psalm to "Roll Out the Barrel!" That was a defiant singing of the Lord's song in a foreign land, and it disguised that deeper, universally human pain - which comes when we are cut off from home.

"How shall we sing the Lord's song?" There will come a day when each one of us will ask the question. In all probability it will not be as dramatic or traumatic as the experience of prisoners of war. But there is a universality about the experience of dislocation, exile, homesickness. There will be, for each of us, a dark night, a separation, a loss, a captivity in the midst of which we will hear, from deep within, our own voice asking: "How can I sing the Lord's song here?" My guess is that already there have been moments when we asked that, and sometimes, at least, the only answer we received was silence.

The poet, John Crowe Ransom...

> "Two evils, monstrous either one apart,
> Possessed me, and were long and loath at going,
> A cry of absence, absence, in the heart,
> And in the wood the furious winter blowing."

Martin Marty chose A Cry of Absence for the title of a book written about the Winter of the Heart: the times when darkness is more evident than light; when we are exiles far from home; and when God is conspicuous by his absence and silence.

My assumption is that all of us know about this experience. My assumption is also that we attribute the experience to a weakness in our own spirit - a theological vitamin deficiency. If we believed enough we wouldn't feel abandoned, exiled, alone... What a relief to encounter the integrity of the Bible on the topic. As he lived through a period of profound grief, Marty turned to the Psalter and discovered that the sense of "spiritual abandonment" is a major, perhaps the major motif in the collection. Now, clergy who plan public worship liturgies and wish to use the Psalms bump into that reality every week. If you assume that worship ought to be a positive and uplifting experience, and that negativity is not helpful or welcome in worship, you find yourself terribly limited when it comes to choosing Psalms. Fully two-thirds of them, someone has calculated, have something to do with the down side of human life. There are Psalms about death, suffering, sickness, defeat, captivity, exile, homesickness and godforsakenism. If you want only praise, thanksgiving and cheerfulness, you have to stay with one-third of the collection.

Or you have to engage in a little editorial cheating - censoring actually, as we did this morning. Psalm 137 is one of the most powerful. I am always moved by it... But I don't think I ever heard it read in its entirety in worship. If your eyes slipped down the page as we read responsively, you know why. We stopped at verse 6. We always do. Because verses 8 and 9 say -

> "O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
> Happy shall be he who takes your little ones
> and dashes them against the rocks!"

I've never read those words out loud in worship before. I don't think I've ever read them out loud anywhere. I wish, with everything in my heart, they weren't there. I can't understand why they belong there. They are awful words, obscene words.

It is not one of the more noble moments in the Bible, someone said. But it is there, and before you get carried away by our indignation please allow these terrible words to show you that this Psalm is not mystical religious poetry, but the deep and powerful and utterly human expression of real human beings. If I can get past my squeamishness and moral outrage and read it again I see that it is not a prescription for behavior, but an almost understandable hatred which is growing out of an experience of almost unspeakable pain. And if I can stay with it long enough and think about it hard enough, I might even see in these awful words an important idea; namely that this faith of ours is not an academic abstraction, but a flesh and blood response to the realities of human life. I might even see in these terrible words a faith so strong it is willing to entrust God with everything in the human heart, even this passionate hatred. If I can stand in this place long enough, I might even see here a spiritual depth, integrity and maturity which stands in contrast to, and judgment of, the superficiality of much of the religion of my culture which retains its cheerfulness by simply refusing to acknowledge the human condition.

The promise was broken. God had promised to be God to them. God had promised a land and a mighty nation. God had given freedom and food in the wilderness and a law in which they could live with justice and prosperity. The promise was broken... God's Covenant people, God's beloved had been defeated in battle, ravaged, their capital leveled. Their pride, the apple of their eye - the Temple - where God's sovereign majesty and providence and Covenant promise was proclaimed and celebrated by the mighty walls themselves - was a hole in the ground. The people were stripped, lined up - and driven across the desert to forced captivity in Babylon. And there in exile, cut off from home, the humiliation began. As the shock of their defeat began to register, the degradation started -

> "By the waters of Babylon
> there we sat down and wept
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung up our lyres
> For there our captors
> required of us songs
> and our tormentors, mirth, saying
> 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'"
> (Psalm 137:1-3)

Is there a more poignant image than that? Can you see it? Hear it?

"Hey Jew - sing a little. Sing us the one about how glad you used to be when they said, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'"

"Or how about the one about your help comes from the hills. The one about the Lord - your keeper, your shade upon your right hand... that's a good one."

So, the Africans, hunted like animals, caged, shackled, crowded into holds of ships, sold into slavery, and, the final indignity, forced to respect and participate in the religion of their captors - somehow heard in

that religion a truth that overcame the appalling sins of its white adherents. The slaves heard the part about exile and homesickness and in a foreign land they began to sing the Lord's song.

> "Swing low, sweet chariot
> comin for to carry me home"

and

> "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child a long ways
> from home"

The Judeo-Christian faith includes the universal experience of exile. Our religion does not always provide easy answers to the difficult questions about why human beings end up in exile: why the Jews were in captivity, why slavery, why the holocaust... why the agony of brothers and sisters in South Africa, exiles in their own land? Our religion dares to speak of God who enters into those questions, a God who weeps when his own promises seem to be broken.

In the meantime the tendency in public religion, church religion, is to lighten up, accent the positive, be bright and cheerful, e.g. "A sunbeam, a sunbeam, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam." "Think positively..." "Something good is going to happen to you." The "Be Happy Attitudes."

In Marty's book, which I mentioned earlier, he confesses that this "summery spirituality" of much American religion is simply inadequate. He writes:

"The message in this world of spiritual best-sellers and large audiences is consistent:... follow my prescription, think right thoughts and all the chill will disappear. Joy comes to those who prosper in faith: Christ is said to be the answer no matter what the question is... God is immediately present. 'I know, I have talked with him,' says the evangelist or the peddler. Send ten dollars, turn the dial to our program, buy the book - whatever the form of counsel, it always amounts to the same thing - and the abundant life of sunshine and joy will be yours." [A Cry Of Absence, p. 6]

And then Marty speaks for many of us - with the integrity of this terrible but beautiful Psalm - "Many serious people who seek are repelled by such appeals. They turn off the television station... They do not belong, they feel, to the region where sunshine comes so easily." (Ibid)

Popular religion desperately wants to be cheerful. And, the market wants religion to be cheerful. The world, after all, is sad enough. Who needs any more of it? While there is truth there - while the deep heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is joyful hope - nevertheless, a religion which intends to meet me where I live and take seriously my participation in the human experience, must deal with me not only when I am at home but but also when I am in exile. I cannot be honest and be a sunbeam for Jesus every day.

The idea of exile has been used frequently to describe the human condition. The idea of separation from home - from structures of meaning and sources of hope - is a metaphor for the universal human experience of loss: loss of the past, (as we age) loss of an identity, a job, loss of a life-giving relationship. "In your arms I'm home again," lovers say to each other. And, loss of a dear one. Grief feels like homelessness.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, has written a wonderful book, Lament for a Son. His 25 year old son was killed in a mountain climbing accident and Wolterstorff has written one of the most honest and deeply spiritual books I have ever read on the topic. He is a Christian - but he is an honest Christian.

Trying to write about what it is like...

"There's a hole in the world now." [p. 33]

"Elements of the Gospel I thought would
console did not." [p. 31]

And then - this - so reminiscent of Psalm 137 and the experience of everyone of us.

"Let me try again, all these things I recognize. I remember delighting in these - trees, art, house, music, pink morning sky, work well done, flowers, books. I still delight in them... But the zest is gone. My attachment is loosened. I can do without them. They don't matter."

"I've become an alien in the world.
I don't belong any more." [p. 51]

"How am I to sing in this desolate land?" [p. 61]

The ancient faith - the Covenant faith - with its honesty and humanity, embraces the universal experience of grief and separation and exile. The ancient faith does not shy away from the human experience of abandonment. The ancient faith is so honest that it embraces even the human experience of God's absence and silence.

The world has never understood that. The Babylonians who forced the Jews to sing songs of Zion caused them incredible pain and stimulated violent but understandable hatred. What they didn't understand, and what the Jews in exile learned, was that God is never more immediate, never closer, than in those incidents in which we experience abandonment. The power of Israel's faith, compared to any other faith in the world, is that it is precisely when there is no light - when the darkness is thick and deep - that God's love begins to go to work: healing, lifting up, recreating new life.

The world has never understood that about us. The world wants us to lighten up, be pleasant and cheerful. The world wants our music to be lively, uplifting. The world feels much better when, if we insist on using Psalm 137, we at least have the good taste to leave off the end.

I don't believe my experience is very different from most... But it was a turning point for my spiritual growth when it finally dawned on me that faith we espouse is everyday faith, not just "good day faith"; that the depths of human emotion - grief as well as joy, despair as well as good cheer - are acknowledged, celebrated, embraced, and encompassed by that faith. It was an important turning point for me when I finally realized that I don't have to pretend to God; don't have to hold back from God the depths of my own spirit. It was a good day for me when I finally acknowledged that the thrust of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not my believing things about God - or saying I believed things on days when I didn't believe anything. Rather the Gospel is the incredible assertion that God takes me absolutely as I am and believes in me - even when I can't believe anything, and is there with me when I can't see anything but darkness, or hear anything but silence.

Something like that happened for those who came to maturity in the 1960s. Faith in a God of providential love and parental care was one thing in the 1950s. It was an altogether different matter in the next decade. Faith in that time had to contend with a world turned upside down. It was a time of darkness... a time I recall with lingering pain - the events hammering at the human spirit, particularly for the young and optimistic and sunny and cheerful.

The death of John F. Kennedy -

The violent deaths of Civil Rights marchers,
so idealistic and optimistic -

The death of Martin Luther King, Jr. -

The death of Robert F. Kennedy -

And then, in many ways, worst of all, My Lai,
the death of children, killed by American soldiers.

Faith had to speak its word in the midst of all that. If it was only a sunny word, a superficially cheerful word, it didn't make it. What made it was the strong integrity of Biblical religion; which points to a God who participates fully in the pain of the world - and the pain of his individual people.

There is a picture that remains in my mind as a symbol of that critical theological discovery. It is not a religious picture. It won't appear in an art gallery and I certainly wouldn't want to have to defend my choice aesthetically. It is Bill Mauldin's Chicago Sun Times cartoon at the assassination of President Kennedy; a picture of the Abraham Lincoln statue in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Mauldin's Lincoln is hunched over, head in his hands, in the fullness of grief.

That was an icon for me: a picture of the God of the Bible, the God the stories of Israel and the Covenant strain to tell us; a God who not only loves them and sends them sunshine - but a God grieving over the tragedy of his people.

It is the middle of Lent. Slowly we approach the end. And the end of Lent is a cross. It is a silent event and there is darkness all around. The only voice that dares speak is the one on the cross and he asks for us all - for the whole world - "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me."

If your God is not there with him - with you as you stand there, you are missing something. He is not the God of the Bible. If your faith will not accompany you the rest of the way on this journey, you have never allowed it into the depths of your soul.

That is the invitation, in the words of that oldest promise - to let God be God to you at all times and in all places: in the secret places of your soul; in your believing and your unbelieving; in your joy and in despair; at morning and in the darkest night.

The Good News is not always easy news and it is not ever superficial news.

It is that God is in every darkness.

It is that God is in every exile.

The Good News is that there is a promise which still stands when every other promise is broken -

God will be God to us!...

Glory be to God. Amen.

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Dear God of infinite love: As we come closer to the cross, help us see again - the light which shines in every darkness. Give us courage to live fully in darkness as well as light - knowing that you are there, always, forever; - that darkness is as light to you. Amen.